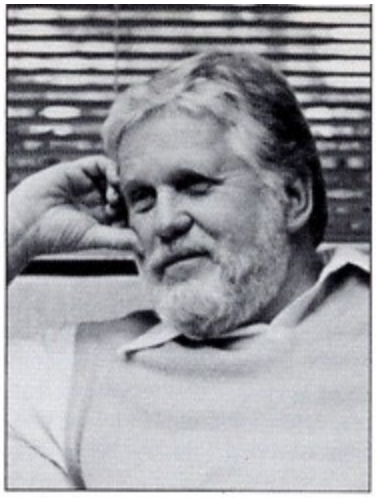
Meet John the Miracle Worker: The Story and Legacy of John Wimber



John Wimber was born on February 25, 1934 in Peoria, Illinois to a rural poor family. His father, Basil, was a drinking man and his parents divorced while John was still young. His mother showered him with "all the acceptance, admiration and praise that he'd need for the rest of his life." John loved his grandfather Charley greatly and six-months before Charley died a Baptist preacher came to talk to him about Jesus. Charley was "marvelously converted" and called each of his own children and John into his room and told them about Jesus. When Charley's time did come he sat up in bed and yelled, "He's coming! Do you hear it? He's coming for me! Sweet Jesus! He's here! Do you see him? Oh, he's here!" and died with his arms held out to Jesus. This somewhat embarrassing event was stuck in John's memory indelibly.

At six or seven years old John got his first saxophone, a great sacrifice for his mother. In 1946 they moved to California and John scored his first professional music gig at age 15. John loved music and he continued his career and eventually met his wife Carol while playing in a band at her Senior Prom in 1955. They married seven months later, John at twenty-one years of age and Carol barely eighteen. She found John to be beautiful, comfortably familiar and emotionally stable. John, by Carol's account, was a "good and honorable man" and a loving father. Several years into their marriage Carol fell into depression and John wasn't able to understand what was happening. She came to despair thinking that no one truly loved anyone other than themselves and responded by spending "the next few months destroying our marriage and making life hideously painful for John."

With three young children, Carol and John had decided to quietly divorce and John was to pick up the papers while on business in Las Vegas. While John was gone Carol came to a point of crisis, thinking that she must be being manipulated the devil to hurt those she claimed to love. This drove Carol to pray sincerely, "Jesus, help me!!" Simultaneously John, gazing at the starry night began to wonder if there might just be a Creator. Gazing upward, speaking out loud he called, "Hey! If You're up there, if Anybody's up there could you give me a little help here?" Returning to his hotel he got a message from Carol to call home. He did and Carol asked his forgiveness and for him to come home. He drove all night aware that something had changed in his life.

When the Wimbers returned to Orange County they enrolled their children in Catholic school, agreeing to certain requirements including being remarried in the Catholic Church and taking a course on raising children Catholic. They began attending mass regularly and some friends of theirs started inviting them to a Bible study at their home, which they finally accepted. John and Carol began attending the Bible study with a man named "Gunner" and also went to a Quaker church with their friends. John became intensely interested and visited Gunner regularly during work hours to ask question after question. John and Carol were ready to become Christians but didn't know how. Finally Carol blurted out in one their Bible studies, "Something's got to happen! We believe all this! Can we sign up somewhere or something? Please?" Finally, Gunner, who'd been excruciatingly patient said, "I think it's time, let's pray." And they did. Carol and John both accepted Jesus, Carol through the Catholic Act of Contrition and John sprawled on the floor and weeping. Shortly thereafter John became convinced that Jesus was asking him to give up his music career which he loved so much and he did, with nothing to fall back on. John began spending much time with Gunner and started leading people to the Lord. This man, Gunner, preached a radical Christianity of God's total ownership of his people and the forfeiture of rights with salvation.

During this time the Wimbers launched a Bible study at their own home after moving to Yorba Linda and filled it with new believers. One day while praying John was startled to discover that his prayers made no sense and his talk was gibberish. As a member of a Quaker Church he was quite alarmed at the thought he may have been speaking in tongues. Carol tried to comfort him with, “Maybe it’ll go away.” John was notably concerned and confused how it could be that Satan had slipped in while he was talking with the Lord. Around this time John’s youngest son, Sean, disturbed the local beehives up the street. John rushed to his screaming son and ripped off his clothing and brushed away the many bees off on his stung body and carried him to the house. As John rushed him inside he prayed in tongues and as they set him down in bed John laid his hand on him and continued praying. To their surprise and joy the stings didn’t swell but rather disappeared until Sean was sleeping peacefully. At the time both John and Carol were convinced of this miraculous healing but as time went on, and their church continued to disparage the gifts John became to wonder if maybe it wasn’t simply a natural occurrence after all. John taught Bible studies and after time was leading four or five a week all the while leading many to Christ, discipling them and working his regular job. During this time John went back to school and studied Bible, Sociology and Archeology. He finally accepted a job on staff at Friends Church despite his fear of the disadvantage this would give to his evangelistic ministry. At this time Carol became an expert in the Church on the dangers of the Charismatic movement and was particularly adamant against tongues. She regularly taught on this subject and was even involved in asking people to leave the church because of their involvement in the gifts. After many years of fruitful and successful ministry on staff at Friends Church John accepted an offer for him to establish the Charles E. Fuller Institute of Evangelism and Church Growth in 1975. With John’s new exposure to various denominations and streams of the Church he contracted a “severe case of ‘whole-church love’.” John was particularly interested in those churches that grew for no apparent human reason. It wasn’t the program or the building or anything else that John could see but a move of God and he was intensely interested in what might be the secret ingredient. The Lord abruptly interrupted both of their lives at this point. John received a word from the Lord via a woman. The message was tears and simply “God wants to know “Are you going to use the authority or not?”” For Carol, this interruption took the form of a dream in which she was condemning speaking in tongues. This was not an unusual but disturbingly she woke from this dream speaking in tongues and convinced that it was of God. Carol again began leading a Bible study with this new understanding and the group was “so fully in love with Jesus that by the time the Holy Spirit was presented, they were filled with the Holy Spirit without even realizing it until it was too late.”

John, noticing the change in his wife came before the Lord in desperation and was met by the Spirit and healed deeply. He began attending Carol’s Bible study, of which it was said, “Brokenness and a hunger for God was more an earmark than was the demonstration of the gifts.” Before long the group was asked to leave the church and subsequently began a Calvary Church. God spoke to John confirming that “Yes, Christians are called to heal the sick in the same way as they are called to evangelize,” and John began preaching it from the pulpit and making altar calls for healing. This act of obedience frustratingly precipitated nothing for a nine months and John was driven to exasperation not understanding why God would not back up what he’d commanded. The dam broke when John was called over to pray for a sick woman in her home. After John’s faithless prayer and as he was explaining to her husband how not everyone is healed, the woman sat up and made them coffee, completely healed.

As John drove home in ecstasy he had a vision of a giant honeycomb dripping honey on all below it and these people’s various responses. God explained that his grace was for all and that the problem with the transfer was not on his end. The floodgates were now open and healings of all types began happening in church. Ministry there in Calvary Chapel was glorious and the church grew from 60 to 1500 in three years. During this time John’s gift of healing became more evident and he asked his wife, “Carol, should I get a tent? Or should I train the church to do the work of the church?” They both knew the answer and John continued training teams to heal the sick, cast out demons and bring people into relationship with Jesus.

In 1982 even the Calvary Movement was becoming unsettled by this radical congregation and asked them to rename themselves and join the fledgling "Vineyard" movement and they did. John Wimber spent the rest of his life ministering in and through this movement. For several years he taught a class on the role of the miraculous in evangelism at Fuller and went on to write several books, including Power Evangelism and Power Healing. He became the international director of the Association of Vineyard Churches and formed Vineyard Ministries International and Vineyard Music Group. During most of this time he continued to pastor his congregation at Vineyard Christian Fellowship in Anaheim. The movement grew quickly due to the Holy Spirit's work and the active evangelism and Church planting of each of the Churches. In 1986 he suffered his first heart attack and in 1993 he was diagnosed with inoperable cancer. Throughout this time he remained an active minister and author even despite his stroke in 1995. On November 17, 1997 John Wimber went to be with Jesus leaving a legacy of obedience to Scripture, Spirit-filled worship music and confidence in a Jesus who still heals.

Wimber's Legacy

John Wimber's life and ministry are still bearing fruit in many lives. His obedience-based theology, sensitivity to the Holy Spirits' leading and emphasis on living out the ministry of Jesus clearly made him an effective equipper of the Church. John asked God one day for his 'call' and heard very clearly that God intended for him to be a 'change-agent'. Wimber changed the lives and walks of numerous unsaved and Christian people, leading them to Jesus and teaching them to let Jesus manifest himself not only in their character but also in their action and ministry. Wimber stands out among Charismatic leaders because of his unique journey to Spirit-filled ministry and his theology of obedience over experience.

Unlike many of his peers John could say, "I did not have a climactic moment of holy electricity that caused me to find texts to support my experiences." Instead, he arrived at his belief through the Word of God, which he identified as the primary and most important avenue for God self-revelation. This confidence in Scripture led him to preach and practice healing prayer in his Church and despite the lack of any miraculous healings he continued to obey this direction from God. When tempted to give up preaching healing the Lord confronted him saying "Preach my word, not your experience."

Wimber remained faithful to this call and when divine healings did begin to occur he had a deep appreciation for the dry time that had forced him to rely fully on God's word and not his own experience. With this understanding Wimber could declare "Obedience to God's Word is the fundamental reason that I pray for the sick and receive prayer personally." Having gained this understanding he could operate in the gifts without making the experience of them central as some other Charismatic leaders have been tempted to do. Though miraculous healings played a significant part in his ministry, he noted the danger of lives centered on "ecstatic, spiritual experience." This shift of focus though it may seem subtle had dramatic effect on the distinctions of Wimbers ministry. Wimber admonished his readers not to seek formulas to see divine healings but rather "to seek the Lord and Lifegiver himself, Jesus Christ." With the complete ability and responsibility for healing in God's hands alone he could declare "We obey and leave the results to God."

Rather than attempting to measure his success by the miraculous signs he asked himself "Was I faithful to teach the whole counsel of God and to train the Church?" This alone, Wimber understood was within the power of human ministers. John Wimber was also a man constantly and intently listening to Jesus' guidance. When the Lord declared to him "I've seen your ministry and now I'm going to show you mine." John learned that his task was to cooperate with the Spirit's ministry, not initiate his own. And this is exactly what it is said that he did. His wife Carol says puts it this way: "John was always looking for what Jesus was doing…and then he put his hand to that." In response to God's declaration John submitted to the Lord's leadership for ministry and found it a great relief to "let God run his Church." With this focus, John was frequently interrupted by Jesus in the midst of his preaching that Jesus might heal someone through him. This happened hundreds of times when John would surrender his own agenda or message momentarily to

allow Jesus to have full reign for ministry. His communion with Jesus was such that he would be constantly asking "Does this please you Lord?"

Wimber's attention to Jesus lead was also apparent in the manner in which he responded to criticism. John was not afraid to receive critique but also was not so governed by the thoughts and words of men that he submitted himself to their control. John's policy was to "Eat the meat and spit out the bones." He would take serious thoughtful criticism before the Lord and ask that he'd be shown whatever was true therein. Thus he was able to respond saying: "If ever there is a choice between the smart thing to do and the move of the Holy Spirit, I will land on the side of the Spirit." Important to an understanding of John Wimber and his ministry is a look at his view of the place of signs and wonders in the ministry of Christ. Wimber paid close attention to Jesus' evangelism and noted how consistently the proclamation of the Gospel was accompanied or even preceded by a demonstration of it. It is with this understanding that Wimber wrote Power Evangelism, which enumerates the benefits of including manifestations of the Kingdom to accompany its declaration. Wimber's insights include an appreciation of the purposes behind miraculous gifts such as healing.

Besides helping to establish the Church and give credibility to the apostles, healing was Jesus' expression of the combination of his compassion and authority. As the present-day ministers in Jesus' name and possessors of Christ's spirit "We do as he did" and thus continue Jesus' ministry who's source was loving compassion. This flies in the face of some contemporary Charismatic leaders who use the gifts to support a health and wealth gospel. Wimber states that "It's not the release from pain and sickness that is the primary goal of healing, it is the release from the guilt of sin." The primary result of Christ's act was healing for our souls, but to say that this is primary does not necessitate that it be the singular result. The Kingdom of God, as Wimber understands it, has been established in heaven and is secured for the future, but the Lord's Prayer encourages us to beg God to "accomplish on earth what he has already established in heaven." Healing is never the end, rather it is the means through which Christ can extend compassion and give a sneak preview of the kingdom coming to earth.

Also central to Wimber's ministry was his emphasis on putting into practice Jesus' teaching. He calls "application of the words of Jesus to everyday life" the "main thrust" of his ministry for the last twenty years of his life. Wimber was quick to critique the anemic Christianity that was mere believing unaccompanied by doing. His duel emphasis on believing and doing are apparent in his writing: "being a Christian with an obedient walk also include[s] the risks of believing and doing those things that Jesus believed and did." For Wimber the great commission in Mt. 28:18-20 hearkens back to the pilot mission Jesus sends the disciples on in Mt. 10:7-8 where he commands them to "preach the gospel of the kingdom, to heal the sick, to cleanse lepers, and to drive out demons." It is clearly Wimber's understanding that Jesus' ministry was never meant to come to an end, but rather to continue through his Spirit-empowered Body, the Church.

Wimber emphasizes this function of the Church when he writes "Exercising the present day ministry of Jesus is actually what this life is all about." A perspective that Christians exist largely to continue Jesus' proclamation and demonstration of the Kingdom of God naturally gives yield to an emphasis on equipping and sending out the members of the Church to do this ministry. Because the Spirit is for all believers Wimber opened wide the doors for ministering Christians: "Everybody can worship, everybody can pray. Everybody can prophesy. Everybody can heal. Everybody can win the lost. Everybody can feed the poor…" The ministry of Jesus' Spirit is not only for holy-rollers but everyday Christians. Wimber revolted against the tendency of domineering ministry personalities to cause regular Christians to shrink back from their call to also minister in Jesus' name.

Wimber's belief was that Jesus' ministry was for all. The Protestant emphasis on the priesthood of all believers means therefore that all Christians, irrespective of vocation, are called to the ministry of the Kingdom of God. Wimber's

interpretation of John 14:12 demonstrates his understanding of the Spirit-empowered ministry of all believers: I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do "the stuff" that I have been doing. He will do even greater "stuff" than these because I am going to the Father. An emphasis of active Christian living as opposed to passive belief was a hallmark of Wimber's teaching. This coupled with confidence in Jesus' desire to continue his ministry of compassion, expressed in forgiveness and healing, made the way for teams and Churches full of equipped Christians who helped the Vineyard movement to blossom. Despite his vocational success and high-ranking responsibility, John Wimber desired to give all praise to his Master and to take none for himself. This was illustrated during one service in which John preached and received an exuberant applause. He slipped out of the building and when questioned as to his tears and exit explained "No one should get an applause like that except Jesus".

Even in the midst of his burgeoning popularity and powerful healing ministry he was able to maintain a sober perspective on the core of ministry. He understood most ministry to be the simple practical stuff, "Listening. Babysitting. Driving people around town." Wimber often expressed his humility and disregard for prestige saying, "I'm change in his pocket. He can spend me anyway he wants." As was apparent in Carol Wimber's biography of her husband's life, John had a real concern to make the most of his time on earth. Like Paul he saw life as strictly a wonderful opportunity to serve God. Even in his years of illness he expressed this desire: "If I let these things (heart attacks, cancer and strokes) stop me then I might as well go home to the Lord right now because it will never end." This mindset came through even in his response, or lack thereof, to his critics. He felt that rather than spending his little energy on defending himself he ought to apply it to what he'd been called; the equipping of saints. Rather being driven by personal ambition John was a slave to a sense of responsibility as a servant of God. "I do not care how God uses me. I just want to serve him in someway as long as he has me here on earth…"

Perhaps John Wimber and the Vineyard are best known for their worship music. This reflects Wimber's love for music but also Spirit-given gifts of praise. His grasp of the human task is clear: "Becoming true worshipers is the chief assignment given us in this lifetime." Vineyard Music Group, also a product of John's ministry, now has music all over the nation and world that draws people to the worship of Christ. Though once a music artist himself John expressed no sympathy for musicians trying to express themselves through worship music: "It's not about you [expressing yourself] its about Jesus, and your only job is to lead the people to him." For Wimber, worship was an end in itself and not to be perverted to selfish ends or used to try to manipulate God. You don't use worship for anything other than to worship God, and you don't use emotion either. People are emotional and that's fine, but you don't use any thing to cause the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Christians are called to obedience and worship. From there the Holy Spirit may choose to act supernaturally, but this is never to be the focus of obedience or worship. Having looked at John Wimber's ministry and appreciated his Biblical and Spirit-led determination toward obedience and servanthood through equipping individuals and Churches to participate in the ministry of Christ, it is appropriate to recognize that this godly man was not perfect.

While Wimber had a high view of what the Holy Spirit could do in shaping the character of a person, he also soberly admitted I have come to the conclusion that this side of heaven, we will not overcome all of our inadequacies. We will make headway in many areas and even overcome some of then, but until we are with the Lord we all fall short of his holiness and perfection. Most notable among Wimber's flaws is what his wife identifies as insensitivity to others. While all are quick to acknowledge John's attentiveness to the voice and heart of Jesus, he apparently lacked this "in the way of an awareness of what others were feeling or thinking." John seems to have had a hard time understanding others struggles, particularly his wife's struggle with depression of which he was somewhat aloof. Though Carol often phrases this in a complementary way, the impression is given that John sometimes domineered in his own perspective without engaging others. Perhaps it should be somewhat encouraging that this man of great sensitivity to God, this servant with God-given authority, lacked in something which is considered to be so important in ministry and in leadership.

In the process of equipping so many individuals and Churches to be the Good News, Wimber had an enormous impact on the Protestant church in America. Through his music and the excitement surrounding the exercise of spiritual gifts the Vineyard movement took a role of some popularity and Christians all over the nation were forced to grapple with Wimber's teaching. As a 'change-agent' Wimber sparked within the Church a fresh awareness that "Our part is to obey his commands, and his part is to execute his will." His emphasis on the whole Church ministering also had a profound impact on the Church's self-understanding. Wimber's unique journey to charismatic Christianity, marked by hunger, brokenness and "total dependence on [God's] grace and mercy" is at the same time a testimony to reasoning skeptics and a challenge to the experience-driven Christians. John Wimber understood his calling to serve as an equipper of the Church to perform the ministry of Jesus Christ, and lived his life in service to this call, in the meantime having a profound impact on numerous individuals as well as the entire Church. *Written in 2001, as a student at Wheaton College.*